In a Class of Their Own

A new breed of Jewish day schools competes with the nation's top academies

BY MINDY SCHILLER SPECIAL TO THE WORLD JEWISH DIGEST

From the outside, it looks like any other school. Yellow ochre bricks and sharp corners suggest solid Midwestern construction. A wide open field gives way to a small, enclosed playground, where six- and seven-year-old children wearing t-shirts, shorts, and an occasional kippah chase each other across woodchips, savoring the last days of summer.

At Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy (HBHA) in Overland Park, Kans., school is about to begin.

Classrooms are a bit jumbled with last-minute preparations. Giant canvases lean against whiteboards in the art studio, one of them sporting a colorful cubist female portrait. Just down the hall, the locked journalism room guards its trove of new Apple computers. Upstairs, the shiny black Physics lab's counters have been freshly washed. And in the main office, a course-catalog proudly displays an eclectic mix of classes: commercial art, astronomy, Web design and Latin.

COURTESY OF GANN ACADEMY

Jewish day schools like Gann Academy (above) near Boston are earning high marks for top-notch academics and facilities.

For all intents and purposes, HBHA could be any other prestigious private school. It offers the same Advanced Placement classes, boasts a perfectly color-coded, state-of-the-art facility and graduates the requisite number of soon-to-be-Ivy-Leaguers. It even displays the prestigious Blue Ribbon Award, a national honor for academic excellence given to only 50 schools in the country. But HBHA is not just any private school. Magen David-shaped floor tiles in the lobby, ritual hand-washing stations in the hallway, and Israeli flags and Hebrew letters stenciled over bulletin boards all make it clear that this school is something else as well.

HBHA is a new kind of school, one of a growing number of Jewish day schools that walk and talk like private prep schools, but maintain a Jewish identity and curriculum. Characterized by academic excellence, an abundance of extracurricular opportunities, innovative pedagogy, cutting-edge facilities and a diverse student body, these schools speak the language of today's achievement-oriented students and parents. Though their predecessors might have assumed students would attend regardless and that pedagogical style was a luxury, this new breed of Jewish day schools markets its curriculum as a selling point and targets those parents for whom a day school education is hardly a given.

These schools fall across the Jewish day school spectrum, from traditional Orthodox day schools to trans-denominational community schools. Indeed, these "boutique" schools, which are often called "community" day schools, represent more an educational style than a movement. Though their student bodies may differ, what they share is their newfound popularity. Between 1999 and 2004 alone, according to a 2004 census of Jewish day schools in the U.S. conducted by Marvin Schick, senior advisor to the Jewish educational advocacy group, Avi Chai Foundation, 83 new day schools have formed and 20,000 more children are attending. While all of these are not community schools, many are, according to Shick, and this number does not even include the number of Orthodox day schools that have adopted the pedagogic style associated with the trend. As these new schools appear, a new phenomenon in Jewish education is emerging, one that is attracting Jewish families for whom day school was never a realistic option.

"One-third of the 9th graders [in new Community high schools] have never been in Jewish day school," says Rabbi Josh Elkin, executive director of the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE), a national, non-profit organization tasked with helping to form new day schools in the U.S. "There are some schools closer to 40 percent, even a few closer to 50 percent."

Most of these day schools have only been in existence for about a decade, such as Gann Academy, in Waltham, Mass., outside Boston. Situated near secular private schools with a long history of educational excellence—including the Roxbury-Latin School, founded in 1645—Gann now counts 305 students after a decade of operations.

But it wasn't always this way. Initially, Gann faced an existential challenge. Why attend a Jewish school when local parents could just as easily send their children to a prestigious private school or a high quality local public school? According to Headmaster Rabbi Daniel Lehmann, the school had to "establish very quickly aca-

demic excellence and credibility…that [we are] going to provide high quality education, [we are] going to do well in terms of college admissions and [we are] going to provide an array of extra-curricular activities that can be comparable on some level to what kids are getting at other schools."

Moreover, says Lehmann, Gann's location among academically elite institutions meant it had to experiment in ways it might not otherwise have done. For instance, Lehmann calls it a "strategic move" that Gann, when looking for space to rent during the first year, nestled itself inside of Brandeis University. This established a working relationship with the institution, setting a precedent for the type of environment Gann would provide.

"We were able to use their library, their athletic facilities … we were able to provide kids with resources that, quite frankly, many of the best schools in the community couldn't provide." When Gann finally did build its own facilities, they were cutting edge—including tennis courts, a double gym, art studios and a black box theatre. "It took us five years to build a serious campus," says Lehmann. "And part of the idea behind it was: we're not fooling around. We're not schlepping. This is for real."

But Gann's innovation extends far beyond its commitment to providing outstanding resources for its students. In its ideology, Gann seeks "to create a certain model Jewish community." Students take part in "Debate Midrash," a forum for discussion about current events, and "Seminar," which opens with a faculty member's leading question and culminates in student-centered, cross-curricular discussion. Gann also fosters an awareness of global issues. In addition to the school's student exchange program, students also travel with teachers to Israel and Eastern Europe during the fall semester of their junior year, and to various other places, such as Greece or Mexico, during the school's "Exploration Week."

Across the country, in West Hills, Calif., a suburb of Los Angeles, the New Community Jewish High School (NCJHS) is just beginning its fifth year. Similar to HBHA and Gann Academy, NCJHS found itself competing not only with some of the finest, but the wealthiest, schools in the area. Still, with just 321 students and only five years of history, NCJHS is the fastest-growing Jewish high school in the nation, according to Head of School Dr. Bruce Powell. In his words, NCJHS offers everything its counterparts do—but more. "[NCJHS] fulfills your greatest expectation for college preparation," says Powell, "and your kid comes out with an amazing Jewish soul."

If Jewish day schools can somehow prove that their environment won't hinder intregration into the broader world, then advocates will have won half the battle.

A quick glance at NCJHS' curriculum bears out Powell's assessment. In addition to the standard 15 Advanced Placement courses offered by most college prep schools, NCJHS also makes arts an integral part of the educational program. "In 9th grade [students] take a round robin of Jewish drama, dance, music and art," says Powell. Moreover, NCJHS offers a world-languages program which is, according to Powell, "second to none." Indeed, it was the first Jewish high school to offer American Sign Language as one of the eight elective languages—in addition to a core Hebrew course.

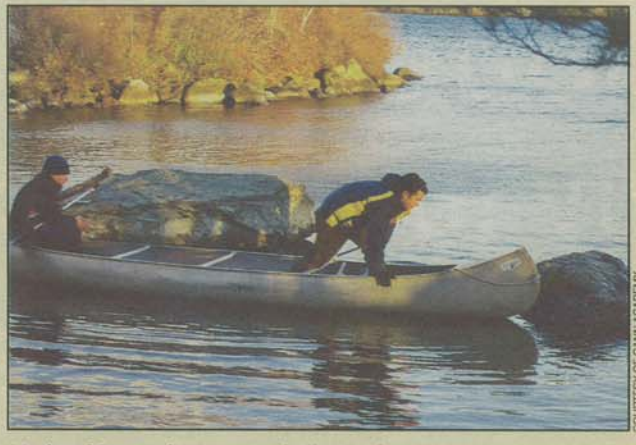
Schools like Gann Academy and NCJHS are making waves in the Jewish world. But the designer day school concept has been integrated into older, traditionally Orthodox schools as well. For instance, out of the 51 U.S. day schools to adopt the Hebrew immersion programs of Tel Am and NETA, 22 of them are Orthodox. The programs—Tal Am for primary grades and NETA for grades 7-12—tackle Hebrew with a multi-sensory approach, a far cry from the dense textbooks of yesteryear. *V'shinantam*, another innovative program for the Orthodox setting, teaches students the Oral Law, such as Talmud or Mishna. Where Oral Law teachers might once have fumbled along, trying to create an appropriate curriculum on their own, V'shinantam offers a multi-faceted way of looking more broadly at both the subject and the student.

Debate Midrash, black box theaters, Israel exchange programs—these are just a few of the innovative elements that characterize these new Jewish day schools. The question is: how have they managed to sell their product to parents?

Marketing 101

For some parents, Jewish education is a given.

"It was always our plan that our children would attend the Academy," says Marla Brockman, a parent and HBHA board member, whose three children attend the school.



COURTESY OF GANN ACADEMY

Members of Gann Academy's crew team hit the water for practice.

But Brockman is the exception. For the majority of American Jewish parents, day school education is neither desired nor anticipated. "Parents today are consumers who seek to shop at the boutique that meets their child's needs," writes Jack Wertheimer, president of the Jewish Theological Seminary, in a 2005 Avi Chai report entitled "Linking the Silos: How to Accelerate the Momentum in Jewish Education Today." "[And that] will trump other considerations."

But the hesitance to enroll in day school reaches deeper than that. Even if schools could provide for every child's needs, says Brockman, "there are people who are really uncomfortable with the Jewish day school concept. It's just 'too Jewish.'"

In fact, the single largest factor preventing most families from choosing day school is concern about segregating children from the non-Jewish population, says Yossi Prager, executive director of Avi Chai in North America, followed by concern over educational quality and the price of tuition.

Dr. Gil Graff, executive director of the Board of Jewish Education in Los Angeles, posed the problem differently. "[Back in 1945-55], the immigrant generation sent their kids to day school," he says, "and whatever went on there went on there … but their children, they demand and expect excellence."

The real question, says Prager, "is *why* do [parents] object to having only Jews in a school setting?" According to Prager, if schools can somehow prove that a day school environment won't hinder integration into the broader world, then day school advocates will have won half the battle.

Ironically, according to Prager, day schools have *always* been preparing students for success in the broader world. He jokes that the school sending the largest number of graduates per capita into his Yale University Law School class was Yeshiva University. In fact, data from PEJE suggests that almost 40 percent of graduates of Jewish high schools attend the top 50 universities in the nation, according to *U.S. News and World Report*.

"The use of an intellect is the use of an intellect no matter what the subject matter is," says Rabbi Leonard Matanky, dean of Chicago's Ida Crown Jewish Academy (ICJA) and associate Superintendent of the Associated Talmud Torahs (ATT), the umbrella organization for Orthodox schools in Chicago.

Dr. Powell, of the NCJHS near Los Angeles, had a different approach. Several years ago, while helping to form the Milken Community High School in Los Angeles, he and his board members were struggling with the notion of starting a day school. One day, he found himself reading through PR materials for the Harvard-Westlake School, a prestigious college-prep school in the area. (Among other things, Harvard-Westlake has an enrollment of 1,576 students, average SAT scores of 704 verbal and 711 math, two football/soccer fields, and two photography labs. It also ranks as one of the top ten schools in the country for National Merit recognition.)

"One day I was reading a brochure," says Powell, "and one of the pictures had boys playing sports, and [it] said basically, 'we train up our young men in the highest ideals of Greece and Rome.'" At that point Powell, covered in goose bumps, said "'Gotcha! We train our

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young men and women in the highest ideals of Jerusalem.'

"We said, O.K., here are the ideals of Rome. Rome is where knowledge is for power. In Jerusalem knowledge is for wisdom. And people just sort of said like 'what?'" But Powell didn't stop there. He showed them a t-shirt with the Yale emblem, the one which includes the Hebrew inscription "Urim v'tumim" ("light and truth"). "And I said, 'So the non-Jews regarded Hebrew civilization and culture as valuable—why don't we? John Adams, who went to Harvard, could read our book in the original—why can't we?'"

Ninth graders at NCJHS, a trans-denominational school near L.A., learn Jewish history through instrumental art.

Motivating factors

That's a question Jewish educators and community leaders have been trying to answer with some urgency, especially over the last two decades, as intermarriage and assimilation rates have skyrocketed.

Indeed, the new community day school movement is both a "top-down" and a "bottom-up" phenomenon—one that can partly trace its roots to community-wide shock over declining Jewish numbers. Starting in the 1980's, educational entrepreneurs like Zalman Bernstein (the founder of Sanford C. Bernstein investment bank) started pouring enormous capital into Jewish education. Bernstein founded the Avi Chai Foundation with a goal to increase Jewish observance and lifestyle. Avi Chai now funds 80 different projects, many of them related to day schools. By 1986, RAVSAK, the Jewish Community Day School Network, was founded to support "pluralistic" Jewish day school education. In 1997, PEJE took up the mission of helping to form new day schools. That same year, the Day School Leadership Training Institute (DSLTI), a program devoted to grooming leaders for an expanding day school movement, was established. PARDeS, the Progressive Association for Reform Judaism; JESNA, the Jewish Education Service of North America; and AMODS, the Association of Modern Orthodox Day Schools and Yeshiva High Schools, were just some of the other institutions to spring up during this time as well.

Clearly, a great deal of money was being poured into the day school movement—at least in the broad scheme of things. But more significantly, things were happening on a grassroots level. Individual communities of every size and location—from San Francisco to Chicago to Atlanta to New York—were launching new initiatives in Jewish education. The Charles Feldman Frankel ATT Resource Center, founded in 2004 by Dr. Joseph Walder in Skokie, Ill., is just one example. The Center offers day school educators a variety of resources—from software to seminars to curriculum to arts and crafts.(The Superfund for Jewish Education, another grassroots initiative, is led by George D. Hanus, the publisher of the *World Jewish Digest*.)

"There is no centralized Jewish day school system [in America]," says Prager of Avi Chai. "[So] the way schools get created, for the most part, is a group of parents or community leaders in a given city, band together to form a new school."

In a happy marriage, the funders from the top were meeting a wellspring of interested parents and activists from below. But it's not as simple as it appears. For instance, it would seem the recent surge in innovation is a top-down attempt to appeal to those parents for whom day school education is not a given—because those are precisely the people the Jewish community is losing. The problem is that this erroneously assumes "top-down" changes to be both plausible and desirable. In reality, says Rabbi Elkin of PEJE, neither is the case. In fact, says Elkin, "to try to have a Federation or a central agency say, 'Hmm. we're looking at a map … we've got 40,000 people here and we've only got one day school … We're gonna go in there and parachute a day school into that community'—*that* is a real recipe for failure." Thus, according to Elkin, the recent trend in day schools is almost certainly *not* a top-down approach.

Prager confirms this. If this trend were merely an attempt to stave off cloudy demographic forecasts, he says, then the change should only exist in the non-Orthodox setting. "But the energy you sense is within the Orthodox community as well."

Possibly the best way to explain the phenomenon is one of growth from childhood to adolescence to maturity. According to ICJA's Matanky, the "professionalization in Jewish education" might simply be a result of the natural evolution of schools, "and the overall ability to measure success." Moreover, "a lot more of the business model has come in. [When] you run a three-and-a-half-million dollar business [with] parents paying 13, 14, 15 thousand dollars for education—there's a different expectation."

And yet, perhaps the answer to the question cannot be summarized in demographic calculations. "There's a whole bunch of people out there who are looking for … a connection, something deeper," says Elkin. Thus, he sees the changes as "a direct function of a thirst on the part of a substantial number of people in the country—many of them laypeople … saying, 'We want something more for our children. And if our community doesn't have it yet, we are going to roll up our sleeves … and make it happen.'"

The truth, of course, is that there is no one answer to the question of cause. Did demographics studies energize the work of PEJE, Avi Chai and other "big picture" organizations? Yes, says Prager. But they could only prepare the tools for others to pick up and use. In short: a top-down effort is only relevant if there is an equally enthusiastic one to match it from the bottom-up. As it happens, the two seem to have met each other in th dle.

Home free?

But is all of this change necessaril good thing?

For instance: are funders and a reaching more Jewish children they merely segmenting an skimpy market? According to it's the latter. Moreover, while adamantly asserts that "comp good," he also wonders if this way to pool community resou his perspective, new schools m ally be more indicative of dis of anything else—in the sens ents may simply choose to own school rather than wo difficulties.

For Elkin, though, segm the population is not a con isn't a case of robbing Peter says Elkin, because a signific of the students in the day s have never been part of it be the Orthodox commu approximately 95 percent o already in day schools, son trend as a positive. "Will i community?" asks Bill Chicago Torah High Sch Centrist Orthodox schoo next September. "Slightl the loss is well worth the

Another issue to consi content of the schools. "A an explosion of these ne Prager, "there hasn't bee on the clarification of t For instance, says P knows what to expect math or science class.

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